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Theodore Roosevelt

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About this Person

Born: October 27, 1858 in New York, New York, United States

Died: January 06, 1919 in Oyster Bay, New York, United States

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Occupation: President (Government)

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"We've had quite a lot of Presidents, They come from near and far, --And few have tried to avoid the job-- --A couple merely annoyed the job-- But no one ever enjoyed the job With the gusto of T.R." --Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benét

Twenty-sixth U.S. president and Republican reformer, who was the youngest man to ever hold the office, first president to win a Nobel peace prize, and the person for whom the toy "Teddy Bear" was named.

- 1880 Graduated Harvard
- 1881 First elected to the New York State Assembly
- 1884 Delegate to Republican National Convention; purchased North Dakota ranch
- 1889 Appointed to U.S. Civil Service Commission
- 1895 Appointed New York City police commissioner
- 1897 Named assistant secretary of the navy
- 1898 Organized and served as colonel of "Rough Riders," during the Spanish-American War; elected governor of New York
- 1900 Elected vice president of U.S.
- 1901 Became president of U.S., following assassination of McKinley
- 1904 Elected president
- 1906 Awarded Nobel Peace Prize for role in Russo-Japanese War
- 1912 Lost Republican nomination for president; helped form Progressive Party of America, "Bull Moose Party"
- 1916 Refused Progressive Party's presidential nomination
- 1917 Rejected by Woodrow Wilson as military service volunteer in World War I
- 1919 Died at Oyster Bay, New York

Although Theodore Roosevelt descended from an old Dutch family that settled in New York (then New Amsterdam) in the 1640s and belonged to the genteel aristocracy of Manhattan, the blood of many nationalities mingled in his veins. He was Dutch, German, Scotch-Irish, Welsh, French, and English. Of course, he thoroughly enjoyed his mixed ancestry and often talked at length concerning it. In the politics of "melting-pot" America, it had great value. Legend has it that while receiving people he would say, "Ah, you have a Welsh name! I have Welsh blood myself." "Well, you are German, so am I." Once, when meeting a Chinese dignitary, he supposedly boomed out automatically, "Congratulations, I am partly Chinese, too!"

As a child, "Teedie" suffered from asthma. Until the age of 11, he was a sickly, puny, fair-haired, nearsighted lad interested in natural history to the exclusion of most other childhood activities. Supposedly his father worried over the sorry specimen he saw and told T.R., "You have the mind but not the body and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should. You must make your body."

"Teedie," who worshiped his father, responded positively. The elder Roosevelt installed a gymnasium on the second floor of their New York townhouse where young Theodore spent long hours with punching bag, dumbbells, horizontal bars, and other exercise

paraphernalia. Although his physique improved, reportedly he was thrashed by a bully in upstate New York in 1872. From that whipping emerged Theodore Roosevelt the warrior. He began boxing lessons, took wrestling instructions, and ultimately learned the Oriental art of self-defense, jujitsu.

Through physical activity he literally remade his body, becoming the robust, muscular individual who peers out from photographs in many history books. Until he wore out his body at the age of 60, Roosevelt lived what he preached, "the strenuous life," the life of fitness, which he believed kept man honed to a "fighting edge," his finest expression.

Nothing ever frightened him again. During his first term in the New York Assembly, he knocked a political opponent senseless. While ranching in the Dakotas, he disarmed a western badman in a saloon, slamming him to the floor. As president of the United States, while attending a reunion of the "Rough Riders" in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he threw the state's governor down a flight of stairs. And though his men hunched behind rocks and trees during the charge up Kettle Hill--not San Juan--near Havana, Cuba, during the Spanish-American War, Colonel Roosevelt with bullets splattering all about him spurred his horse ahead, stopping periodically to allow a few noble comrades to catch up. Years later, he paid his father the supreme compliment when he wrote in his *Autobiography*, "My father was the best man I ever knew." He was "the only man of whom I was ever really afraid."

But if T.R. could be violent, he could also be compassionate. His love for his first wife, Alice Lee, is one of the great tragedies in presidential history. When she died in 1884, he spent two years in mourning. In 1886, he married Edith Carow and with her raised two daughters--one by his first wife--and four sons. He was a great father--instructing, soothing, educating, comforting, and tending his brood. While he was president, laughter rang through the White House. The "Colonel" provoked it.

Still, he could hate mightily. Although he was descended from an old Georgia family through his mother, a southern beauty, Roosevelt, an ardent nationalist, despised the aging Jefferson Davis, calling him "the Benedict Arnold of his time." He could also be clever in his disdain. In the *Autobiography*, he tells how his friends were horrified that he intended to enter politics after graduating from Harvard. "The men I knew best," he writes, "were the men in the clubs of social pretension and the men with cultivated taste and the easy life." They considered politics a cheap affair of saloonkeepers and horsecar conductors. "I answered," he added, "that if this were so it merely meant that the people I knew did not belong to the governing class . . . and that I intended to be one of the governing class."

He became one of the governing class with the help of Joe Murray, immigrant Irish lieutenant to the local ward boss of the 21st Assembly district, the German-born Jacob Hess. They played key roles in T.R.'s election to the State Assembly in 1881. Once in Albany, he immediately became identified with reformers and, despite supporting the tainted James G. Blaine for president in 1884, continued to be so. He enhanced his reputation among respectable, reform-minded, loyal Republicans with an unsuccessful effort to become mayor of New York City in 1886.

President Benjamin Harrison, for whom he campaigned two years later, named him to the three-member Civil Service Commission in 1889. Here, to the dismay of his colleagues, Roosevelt assumed the role of unofficial chairman and helped reorganize the board and its examinations. He also began a steady stream of speechmaking, championing "honesty" in government and "morality" in politics. These views, which he advocated for the remainder of his life, caused some historians to label him, "the apostle of the obvious." His friend, whom he later appointed secretary of war and state, Elihu Root, once remarked that T.R. was the only man he had ever known who discovered the Ten Commandments.

William Strong, the reform mayor of New York, made Roosevelt a commissioner of the city's corruption-ridden police force in 1895. His black cape, tooth grin, and pince-nez glasses soon became symbols of fear as he prowled the streets nightly to make sure New York's finest were at work. When he mistakenly tried to enforce Sunday blue laws closing saloons, New Yorkers decided that their police had been reformed sufficiently.

Rough Riders Fight in Cuba

T.R. was rescued by President William McKinley, who appointed him assistant secretary of the navy. He was involved in the decision to move Commodore George Dewey's India Squadron to Hong Kong from where it sailed against the Spanish fleet at Manila when war broke out. A big navy advocate, T.R. supported the "large policy" of expansionism. He was a jingoist, advocating war with Spain and telling his intimates that McKinley's handling of affairs demonstrated that the president "has no more backbone than a chocolate éclair."

When war came, he resigned from the Navy Department to organize the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry or "Rough Riders," with whom he distinguished himself in Cuba. While America rejoiced in its easy victory in the "Splendid Little War" (it lasted ten weeks), Roosevelt discussed his exploits in a small book entitled, *The Rough Riders*. Never one to downplay his importance, when Finley Peter Dunne, whose columns appeared under the pseudonym of Mr. Dooley in the Chicago *Tribune*, read Roosevelt's book, he had Mr. Dooley say, "If I was him I'd call th' book `Alone in Cuba.'"

"Boss" Tom Platt, Republican senator from New York, sponsored Roosevelt for governor in 1898. Not particularly fond of the nation's newest hero, Platt believed T.R.'s candidacy was the only way the state could be kept Republican considering the serious challenge mounted by Democrats. The Colonel won the governorship by a small majority and soon angered Platt by disregarding recommendations for patronage appointment. As governor, he developed a lengthy, but largely innocuous, reform program. Its main achievement was a tax on corporate franchises.

By 1900, the former Rough Rider was ready for a promotion, and the New York political bosses, especially Platt, were ready to be rid of him. Neither McKinley nor his close associate, Mark Hanna, was thrilled with the prospect of Roosevelt being the ticket's vice

presidential nominee. Nevertheless, they did not intervene when western delegates and eastern party bosses secured his nomination. During the campaign, Roosevelt stumped the country while McKinley remained aloof. They won handily over the Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan, the so-called "Great Commoner."

McKinley Assassinated, Roosevelt Is President

In September 1901, Leon Czolgosz, with a gun hidden in his bandaged fist, shot President McKinley and put T.R. in the White House. Although president by accident, few men have been as prepared to be chief executive. Roosevelt was a respectable scholar, best remembered for his three-volume study, *The Winning of the West*. He thought seriously about major social and military issues the nation faced. An easterner, he had tremendous rapport with westerners. He also traveled abroad frequently and moved easily among the European governing classes.

Professor Richard M. Abrams, University of California (Berkeley), believes Roosevelt was the first modern president, stating that Roosevelt "put the presidency and the federal government at the center of peacetime political action. He made the White House a national focus for the social mood." Still, his tangible accomplishments, when compared to those of William Howard Taft or Woodrow Wilson, are not as great as one might expect from the leading verbal champion of reform.

The late Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter labeled T.R., "The Conservative As Progressive," and that he seems to have been. His greatest achievement was making reform respectable and popular after its radicalization by Populism, a southern and western crusade of dispossessed farmers and opportunistic politicians. Whether Roosevelt was a sincere reformer is in doubt. Of course, the Colonel and reform were symbiotic, mutually benefiting from their relationship. The more T.R. popularized reform, the more popular reform made T.R.

Oratorically, he assailed big business, excoriating it for corrupting the economy, creating a plutocracy, and establishing reverence for commercial greed. The press nicknamed him, "the trust buster." But in truth he supported big corporations, if they behaved in an economically beneficial manner--lowered prices, raised wages, created efficiency in production, and invested in scientific research to improve products. In 1912, as the Progressive Party's presidential nominee, he championed big business in his "New Nationalism" platform, albeit his patrician dislike of "very rich men" continued.

He was an opponent of the existing protective tariff system but, because of political considerations, did not advance revision as an objective of his administrations. He supported moderate strengthening of the Interstate Commerce Commission, established in 1887, with the passage of the Elkins Act (1903) and Hepburn Act (1906). He also helped secure the Pure Food and Drug Act and Meat Inspection Act (1906). However, Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, chief chemist of the Agriculture Department, deserves the lion's share of credit for these.

Always the advocate, T.R. did suggest a variety of changes that became laws later, including the income tax, a national inheritance tax, federal regulation of stock-market speculation, and a federal eight-hour day and workmen's compensation law for laborers. Although essentially unfriendly to organized labor, he intervened in the anthracite coal strike of 1902 to promote a "square deal" for labor and management in ending the dispute.

He Champions Conservation of Natural Resources

Conservation of natural resources is where he is best remembered as a reformer. He depended heavily on Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield and Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot for advice in this area. His program was not that of the preservationist, i.e., naturalist. Rather, his administration championed conservation through policies of "rational use" to provide resources for future generations by reclaiming arid lands, waterways, or water-power sites. He brought considerable land into the public domain to halt exploitation by private interests.

Roosevelt called into being the first National Conservation Convention, which helped spawn 41 state conservation commissions by 1910. He created the Inland Waterways Commission to promote flood control and improve navigation. He also created a Rural Life Commission, which critics dubbed the "Rural Uplift" Commission. After a comprehensive investigation of living conditions in rural areas it presented a lengthy report, which Congress refused to publish. Nevertheless, legislation pertaining to farmers in the Wilson Administration was influenced by this study.

A kind and generous man in many respects, T.R. created a monumental flap in his administration by inviting the distinguished black educator Booker T. Washington to the White House for lunch with him. When southern newspapers heard that for the first time in history a president had sat down to eat with an African-American, they exploded. One called the dinner "the most damnable outrage ever."

Roosevelt was most in his element in foreign relations. He helped shepherd Cuba to a form of self-government with the United States as a protector under the Platt Amendment. He was responsible for the establishment of an American Canal Zone in Panama, where the canal was built and where the United States acted "as if she were sovereign." He sent American customs collectors into the Dominican Republic and justified his action by stating the "Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine," thus making the U.S. the "policeman of the Western Hemisphere."

He spent a great deal of time with Japanese-American relations, trying to uphold the "Open Door Policy" of his predecessor through diplomacy and a show of force, as when he sent the "Great White Fleet" around the world in 1908. He failed to bolster the Open Door, but for his effort in the Peace of Portsmouth that ended the Russo-Japanese War, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. He fostered better relations with Great Britain, using the Alaskan Boundary Dispute (1903) to enhance American prestige and to prompt

the American public to appreciate England's reasonableness in settling the affair. He also played a role in helping Britain and Europe avoid war in the Moroccan Crisis of 1905-06.

The appellation "Big Stick Diplomacy," which has been used to describe the foreign policy of his administration, is a bit misleading. He was quick-witted and at times bellicose but always sane and cautious in committing the nation. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did see the necessity of involving the country more actively in world affairs. His position was that, like it or not, the stature of the United States, its large population, and industrial economy dictated involvement. As he saw it, the main question was whether American leaders would recognize and prepare for the new role or stumble blindly from crisis to crisis.

In spite of a great deal of worry over his presidential prospects in 1904, he was nominated on the first ballot by Republicans meeting in Chicago. He defeated the Democratic Party candidate, Judge Alton B. Parker, also of New York, in the popular vote, 7,623,486 to 5,077,911, and in the electoral vote, 336 to 140. In a moment of unguarded ebullience, Roosevelt pledged not to stand for re-election in 1908, although he would be only 50 years old when he left office. Because of the pledge, the best he could do later on was to pick his successor. He chose Secretary of War William Howard Taft, a politician who held but one elective office, president of the United States, 1909-13.

Soon after ending his time in office, Roosevelt hunted in Africa, toured in Europe, and settled down to a literary career when he returned home. But politics and governmental power still fascinated the Colonel. Reformer friends convinced him that Taft had betrayed "Rooseveltian policies." Taft, angered by criticism attributed to his old friend, allowed Attorney General George Wickersham to bring suit against the U.S. Steel Corporation for violating the Sherman Anti-trust Act with T.R.'s permission in the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company merger in 1907.

He Leads "Bull Moose" Party

Stung by accusations of improprieties on his part, Roosevelt threw his hat into the political ring against Taft for the 1912 Republican presidential nomination. When Taft defeated him, T.R. claimed that the nomination had been stolen and with ardent supporters bolted the Party, forming the Progressive Party of America at Orchestra Hall in Chicago. As the standard bearer for the "Bull Moose party," its unofficial name, he ran second to Woodrow Wilson, who was elected with only 42% of the popular vote. While campaigning in Milwaukee on October 14, 1912, Colonel Roosevelt was wounded by a would-be assassin.

Although he halfheartedly supported Progressive hopefuls in 1914 elections, when they tendered him the 1916 presidential nomination, he refused. With the entry of the United States into World War I, he offered his services to the military through Wilson, who rejected him. All of Roosevelt's sons served in the Great War. Quentin was killed in aerial combat in France in 1918. Theodore, Jr., was the prime mover in founding the American Legion of 1919, the veterans organization of the First World War. Both Theodore, Jr., and Kermit died while on active duty in World War II. President Theodore Roosevelt passed away peacefully in his sleep on January 6, 1919.

Ranked seventh among presidents in a 1962 poll of historians, he is the only 20th-century president enshrined on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. Asked to comment on his time in office, he said, "I believe in a strong executive; I believe in power, but I believe that responsibility should go with power, and that it is not well that the strong executive should be a perpetual executive." He also said, "I have tried to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with my God."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name variation: called "Teedie" as a child, he preferred T.R. or Theodore, or the "Colonel" in later life and abhorred the public usage of "Teddy." Born in the Manhattan borough of New York City on October 27, 1858; died on January 6, 1919, at Oyster Bay, New York; son of Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., and Martha "Mittie" (Bulloch) Roosevelt; married: Alice Hathaway Lee, October 27, 1880 (died February 14, 1884); married: Edith Kermit Carow, December 2, 1886 (died September 30, 1948); children: (four sons) Theodore, Jr., Kermit, Archibald Bulloch, and Quentin; (two daughters) Ethel Carow and Alice Lee (the only child of his first marriage about whom the song "Alice Blue Gown" was written). Relatives: uncle of Eleanor Roosevelt, great-uncle of newspapermen Joseph and Stewart Alsop, fifth cousin and uncle by marriage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and third cousin twice removed of Martin Van Buren. Predecessor: William McKinley. Successor: William Howard Taft.

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